

From "stay ; site-specific work in a variety of media, created for the private rooms and public spaces of the Great Eastern Hotel, London. 1 - 15 July 2005"

FOREWORD by David Wright, Director, Commissions East

'Stay' at the Great Eastern Hotel is the first in a series of pioneering projects which will, as part of Escalator Visual Arts, support and promote some of the Eastern region's most talented artists.

Eleven artists responded to the Great Eastern Hotel's complex spaces, history and the many layers of activity taking place within the building. These impressive interventions were presented over a two week period during July 2005 and were a great credit to the energy and enthusiasm of the artists' involved.

"Stay" was important for Commissions East as it highlights our commitment to commissioning new work by artists for notable locations as well as being part of our programme of professional development for artists. In addition, the project created an opportunity for Commissions East to establish and develop new working relationships with the artists concerned. We were fortunate to work with Cherry Smyth as the curator of "Stay" as well as benefiting from Sigrid Williams' expert project management. We are also grateful to Ali Smith for her contribution to this publication.

Projects of this kind always depend on the vision of funders, sponsors and partners. The sponsorship from 'one' (the train operator for London and the East of England) was important in linking "Stay" with CAN.05-Contemporary Art Norwich. In addition, the assistance provided by Cole & Sons and Corgi Classics Ltd was a critical factor in the realisation of two of the artist's projects.

"Stay" would not have been possible without the financial assistance and ongoing support of Arts Council England, East and their backing of Escalator Visual Arts.

Finally, the Great Eastern Hotel's enthusiasm for and assistance with "Stay" establishes an exciting precedent for partnerships between commercial organisations, artists and arts organisations.

CHRIS WOOD by Cherry Smyth

'(how can the water rise up out of its grave of matter?) - (how can the light drop down out of its grave of thought?) - everything at the edges of everything else rubbing - ' Jorie Graham Jorie Graham - 'Event Horizon', from her collection 'Regions of Unlikeness' Ecco Press 1991.

For Chris Wood, her canvas is glass and her medium is light. She uses one to manipulate the other, with subtle interventions carefully placed in the optical plane. She harnesses patterns of light into exquisite tiny movies or streams of fluttering images, which recall ephemeral glimpsed moments in the natural world. As glass is used more predominantly as a sheeted shield, it is perceived as a material that excludes the majority of people from huge corporate buildings or as a functional piece of tableware that we unthinkingly use everyday. Wood is interested in restoring the lyrical properties of glass and its ability to captivate. Her sculptures are simple arrangements of optically coated glass, which create kinetic patterns of reflected and refracted coloured light, from both natural and artificial sources.

In her piece for the Great Eastern Hotel, 'Optical Aggregate', Wood used natural light and uncoated glass so that the effect was largely monochromatic. She adapted a set of fixed metal and glass shelves - an industrial, functional piece of furniture - into an exquisite light box filled with ambient light. As with any great illusion that depends on mystery and magic, the materials used to transform the existing object were quite simple and easily seen from the side of the shelving unit: a long mirror angled at the back of the shelves to reflect both the soft and directional light from the glass roof, a sequence of wine glasses filled with water; and a sandblasted panel of glass attached to the front of the unit with a thin mirror coating along its upper and lower edge. The angled mirror captured the light falling through the atrium, reflecting the image of sections of the glass ceiling and the metal framework of the lift. Thus the unseen aspects of the hotel architecture were made visible and played across the mirror into the glasses of water, which acted as a lens to project the image onto the screen of glass (page 29, image ii). In this simple, pleasing cinema, each wine glass appeared to glow like a single frame in a strip of monochromatic film, which needs light to come alive. Together, the long series of projected images resembled the blurred landscape viewed from a moving train, the width of the panels mimicking the window frames.

Wood arranged the glasses in sets of various numbers, in different patterns - some in an arc, others in an undulating wave, more in double or triple rows, so that the thrown shapes were different in each panel. Each glass was set in place with mathematical precision, enhancing the visual harmony on the screen. As you walked past the piece, the images moved in and out of focus, some like tall tulips, others reflecting a disc resembling the horizon in a seascape at dusk. Distances and nearness altered from panel to pane, as movement occurred both from side to side and front to back.

As daylight changed, the piece became a clock or sundial, reconnecting the city dweller, often disassociated with the natural environment, with the wonder of the sun's resource. Like the solar eclipse of 2003, which brought minutes of cold and dark and song-less birds to the city, Wood makes us reconsider what we take for granted. Daylight determined how we organised our activities and social interaction many centuries until candlelight, electric light then electronic light extended visibility. Increasingly, institutions like hotels, casinos, prisons and hospitals never experience darkness or natural light.

The piece evoked the functions, from weddings to Bar Mitzvahs, held in the space, as well as the social role of drinking to celebrate, to finalise a deal, to lubricate business events. Sometimes when the sun was high overhead, the pale yellow walls of the atrium hung in a suspended golden drop in the glasses, like honey or a slow pour of Chardonnay. The journeys of hundreds of glasses circulating from kitchen, to trays, to guests, to dishwashers, to polishers were distilled into a quiet, still trophy. The transient gradations of light, the kinetic quality of the work viewed from different angles and the changing levels of water in the glasses, also spoke of the rhythms of the arrivals and departures of the guests.

As well as the social meanings captured by 'Optical Aggregate', the piece also radiated rich formal associations. The tight geometry contrasted with the sensuous curvilinear images reflected and refracted onto the screen. There was a musicality to its form, the glasses arranged like scales in different keys. The changing light caused the piece to dance between the flat perspective of a painting and the three-dimensionality of a sculpture, between stasis and fluidity. The work referenced not only other artists like James Turrell, Anthony McCall

and Dan Flavin working with light, but also painters like Agnes Martin and Bridget Riley, who express a rigorous minimal aesthetic. Wood invests that aesthetic with a wistful romanticism that brings warmth and humanity to her work. Like haiku of light, these floating, flickering shadows produced the 'ahh!' of surprise and recognition, acknowledging how the faintest glimmer of emerging light in an overcast sky can uplift our mood, alter a decision. We merely have to watch and wait to see daylight's shifting wave patterns embodied.

Wood's installation looked so perfect for the site, it was clear that she brought a meticulous eye to the construction of the work, as though she'd entered the body of the shelving and managed to release it's soul.

'Optical Aggregate' 2005, Wine glasses, mirror, water, natural light.